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Republicans in New York



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Maritza Castillo is proud of her son and furious at President Bush. She came here from Miami this week to remind Bush and the Republicans that the Army locked up her soldier son but no one can hide the truth about the war in Iraq.

On May 21, Sgt. Camilo Mejia became the first American soldier convicted of desertion from the Iraq war. After a three-day trial in a special court-martial at Fort Stewart, Ga., Mejia was slapped with the maximum one-year prison sentence, demoted to private and given a bad-conduct discharge.

The very day he went on trial in Georgia, courts-martial began in Baghdad for a group of U.S. soldiers accused of torturing Iraqi detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison.

Army Spec. Jeremy Sivits, the first to plead guilty in that scandal, received the same one-year sentence as Mejia. At the Baghdad trials, several G.I.s who were charged along with Sivits said they were merely following orders.

Mejia, on the other hand, claimed just the opposite.

In early March, even before the heinous story of Abu Ghraib was revealed, Mejia publicly announced he would not obey orders to return to his Army Reserve unit in Iraq and was instead filing for conscientious-objector status. Months of combat, he said, had convinced him our country was committing war crimes in Iraq.

A permanent U.S. resident who was born in Nicaragua, the 28-year-old Mejia went AWOL during a trip back to the States last October and went into hiding for several months before making his announcement.

In the conscientious-objector application he filed in March, he claimed his unit had committed abuses against Iraqis at another prison, the Al Assad detention center. These abuses, he said, included sleep deprivation and loading of pistols near the ears of prisoners.

He also claimed he witnessed crimes by fellow soldiers against innocent civilians, including one incident where soldiers failed to provide medical treatment for an Iraqi child they had shot and who later died.

"Treating human beings, or these so-called combatants, with great cruelty was a difficult thing to do," Mejia wrote in his application. "I believe that being a soldier should not prevent me from doing the right thing."

Tod Ensign, head of the anti-war veterans' group Citizen Soldier, sees a

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glaring contradiction in the two courts-martial. "You do the deed and you get a year, and you refuse to do it and you still get a year," Ensign says.

In Mejia's case, fellow soldiers testified at his court-martial that he had been a brave and respected sergeant in the unit before going AWOL. At last night's convention session, the slogan "A Nation of Courage" was a major theme. Earlier this month, Mejia wrote a letter from prison in which he revealed a much different notion of wartime courage and cowardice.

"I commanded an infantry squad in combat and we never failed to accomplish our mission," Mejia wrote. "I was a coward not for leaving the war, but for having been a part of it in the first place. . . . I was terrified, I did not want to stand up to the government and the Army, I was afraid of punishment and humiliation. . . . I apologize to the Iraqi people. To them, I say I am sorry for the curfews, for the raids, for the killings. May they find it in their hearts to forgive me."

Mejia's mother Maritza, his father, who lives in Nicaragua, his Aunt Norma Castillo, who lives in East Harlem, and the rest of the family want the Republicans to know they back his decision to go to jail rather than serve one more day in a war they consider unjust.

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